

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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THE CONCLUSION is inescapable," Albert Florian said. "Someone in this club has been murdering its members."

Which one of you two—besides me—has been murdering members of this club, I wondered fretfully.

"When we organized in 1946, there were a round dozen of us," Florian said. "For thirteen years we met annually on the twentieth day of October. But now we discover that within the space of one year nine of our members have met with fatal accidents." He regarded Gerald Evans and me rather severely. "I believe that we all agree that this looks a bit suspicious."

Evans and I nodded.

We three were in one of the private dining rooms at Blutow's on Sixth Street for our annual meeting. This year one of the restaurant's smallest rooms proved adequate.

Florian ticked off the fatalities. "Carson, Abnerathy, and Terwilliger met with automobile accidents."

I had arranged two of those. Carson and Abernathy both had homes at the tops of hills with delightfully suitable winding and precipitous roads leading to their bases. A simple adjustment upon the steering apparatus of their respective automobiles and they descended neatly

9 FROM 12 LEAVES 3

by **Steve O'Connell**

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To make a club extremely exclusive, curtail its membership. This may be accomplished by destroying those individuals found to be in excess, a method that has much in its favor: (1) The members ousted in this way won't complain. (2) A refund of paid dues will not be requested.

and quickly from garage to eternity.

But who had disposed of Terwilliger? It was a puzzler indeed.

"Phelps fell or jumped from the roof of a ten story building."

Do you realize how *few*—if any—windows of modern air-conditioned buildings are actually meant to be opened? I had to carry Phelps all the way to the roof before I could dispose of him. I suffered an excruciating backache for weeks.

"Schaller was electrocuted when his radio fell into his bathtub."

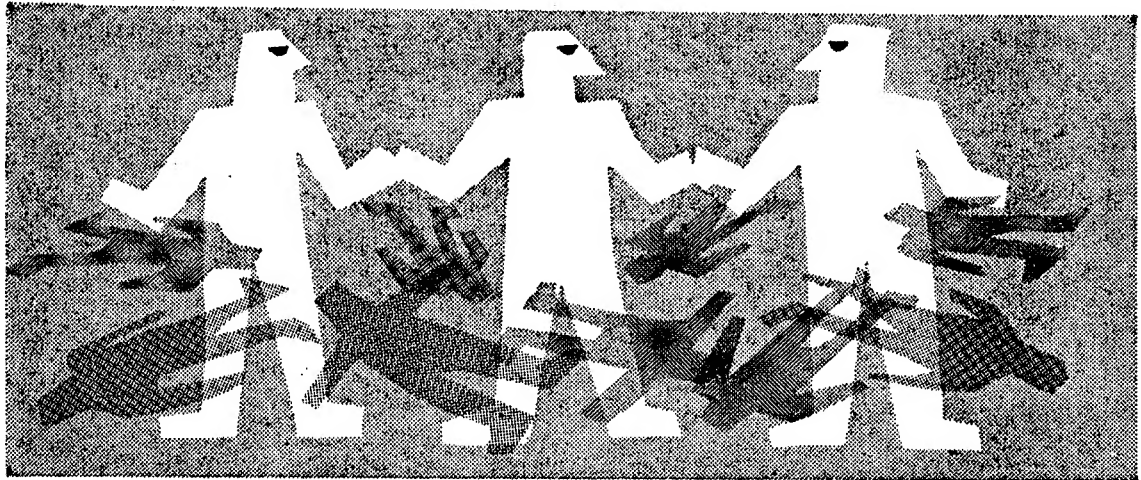
himself while cleaning his gun." Florian shook his head slowly. "But we all know that he was deathly afraid of firearms and would never allow any of them in his home."

My plans had called for him to fall off a cliff near his house. Really a beautiful view.

"Llewellyn walked into a train."

Not my work.

"Naison was struck on the top of the head by a rivet as he took his constitutional past an apartment building under construction." Flor-



Now that could have been an accident. However I know that Schaller had no use for tubs. He was a shower man.

"Wentworth accidentally shot

ian showed teeth. "It was dusk and no work was at the moment in progress, but nevertheless the only conclusion the police could come to was that it was an accident."

I wondered how that had been done. Did the murderer lurk high in the scaffolding, rivet poised between thumb and forefinger, waiting for the appropriate moment?

"And Dodsworth fell off the dock at his summer cottage and drowned."

A direct crib from my plans, I thought indignantly. I too knew that Dodsworth couldn't swim.

Florian pointed to the unopened magnum in a place of honor in the center of the table. "Now obviously our club members were not eliminated in order to gain possession of that bottle."

Obviously not.

In 1946, all twelve of us were junior officers on the cruiser *Spokane*—united by our reserve status among the trade school boys and the prospect of impending discharge from active service.

It followed that we should gather together for a misty party of farewell before we scattered to various parts of the States. As the evening became wetter, our regrets at the possibility of our never seeing each other again became unendurable and the inevitable annual reunion was suggested.

The bourbon was excellent and the suggestion blossomed until we found ourselves in the throes of a Last Man Club.

The terms were the usual. The last survivor of our group would have the honor of drinking our duly dedicated bottle of champagne in

lonely grandeur. Providing, of course, that his stomach had not so aged that the feat was impossible. And we chose a centrally located city as our meeting ground.

If we had left it at that, presumably most, if not all of us, would have been alive to attend our fourteenth meeting.

However, we realized that time has a tendency to alter one's economic status, possibly for the worse, and so each one of us contributed five hundred dollars of our accrued pay toward a fund to be used to defray travel expenses for those of us who might need it.

A formal agreement was drafted which stipulated that besides the champagne, the last survivor would also inherit what remained of the fund.

If anything did remain.

And that specifically accounted for the present depleted state of our club.

At the suggestion of Terwilliger, an investment man, who could not tolerate the idea of idle money, our six thousand dollars had been invested.

Terwilliger had chosen stocks in an insignificant little oil company.

The company is no longer insignificant and the shares were now worth almost a million dollars.

Florian regarded me for a moment. "I rather suspect that you're the murderer, Henry. You're the only Harvard man among us."

"It's remarkable that the police

haven't gotten suspicious," Evans said.

Evans fancies himself an artist. I've seen some of his paintings and while I am not a master of judgment in matters aesthetic, I do reflect that he is indeed fortunate that he does not have to pursue art for a living. He boasts of an inheritance.

"These 'accidents,'" Florian said, "occurred in widely separated points of this country. Evidently no one but us knows that there is a connecting link between them all."

"Why don't we call them to the attention of the authorities?" I suggested. Naturally I wasn't serious. But I was interested in seeing which one of them would object.

"That could present some difficulties," Florian said. "Suppose the heirs of the nine untimely deceased went to court, claiming that in the course of normal longevity they might eventually have gained possession of the million. It could lead to an anarchy of lawsuits."

"Couldn't we just call this whole thing quits?" Evans asked. "Dissolve the club and divide the fund three ways?"

Florian is a lawyer. He shook his head gloomily. "As a labor of love, I made the provisions of our club absolutely iron-clad. In the event we dissolved the club, the fund would go to the Yale Alumni Society."

I shuddered. That stipulation had been entered without my knowledge. "Then must we all wait to be

murdered? A chilling prospect!"

"We're safe nowhere," Evans agreed.

Florian nodded. "Not even in our bathtubs."

We smoked our cigars.

"Are we agreed that the motive for the murders is money?" Florian asked after awhile.

Evans and I nodded.

After several puffs of his cigar, Evans said, "I am an artist and therefore above money. Besides that, I have four hundred thousand, give or take a few dollars."

"Ordinarily I would say that my assets are my own business," Florian offered. "However under the circumstances I am willing to admit to being worth close to a quarter of a million."

"I have some five hundred thousand in shipping," I said.

Actually my checking account showed less than a thousand. I did have a spot of family money three years ago, but I had invested heavily in Taliaferro Transit. I should have known better. The Board of Directors was solid Princeton.

A thought seemed to strike Florian. "By George, but we are safe from murder."

I failed to see that.

Florian smiled. "Don't you see, the murderer doesn't *dare* strike again."

"Why not?"

"Because if he murders once more, that will leave just two people in the club."

"I admire your arithmetic," I said. "However. . . ."

Florian held up a hand. "Of the two survivors, one is the murderer and one isn't."

"Granted."

"And in that case," Florian continued, "The one who isn't the murderer will immediately be forced to flee to the police. It is a naked matter of survival. He cannot sit about waiting to be murdered."

Florian rubbed his hands. "The murderer will be convicted and executed and therefore the lone survivor will inherit the entire fund. Plus the champagne."

"What about the anarchy of lawsuits?" Evans asked.

"I'm sure the survivor would risk them rather than his life," Florian said. He beamed. "I think that bringing this out into the open has been salubrious. The murderer is stymied. He cannot act again."

Evans nodded. "He murders at his peril."

"We'll go on attending these reunions year after year," Florian said enthusiastically. "Who knows how long that will be."

"Fifty years," Evans said. "We all look healthy."

"And perhaps the murderer will be the last to die," I added somberly.

"There's also this tragic possibility," Florian said. "Why can't the two of us that are innocent run to the police, revealing that the one remaining is the murderer. And so, to protect himself, the murderer

may kill two instead of one. That's something we've overlooked."

We all agreed that we had.

We adjourned our meeting shortly after dinner.

I drove back to my hotel, walked upstairs to my room, and locked the door. I lit a cigar and proceeded to think.

Florian had been right. I would have to murder him and Evans, but that presented a difficulty.

Which one of them should I murder first?

If I disposed of my competing murderer, the survivor would immediately rush to the police. I certainly could not have that.

However if I first got rid of the one of us who was pure as the snow, then my opposite number certainly could not go rushing to the police.

His accidents certainly could not bear the scrutiny of the police either.

And that would leave just the two of us—cautious and wary—but I had every faith that I would triumph in the finals.

But which one of them was the murderer? Evans or Florian? Could I get them together and dispatch them as one? I did not see how.

Momentarily I thought of murdering from the viewpoint of availability. I knew where Florian would be tonight. He was the only one of us who made his home in this city. Evans undoubtedly was at a hotel, but I hadn't the faintest idea which one.

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But I rejected that course of action. There was a fifty-fifty chance that I might be killing the wrong man first. Not very good odds after all the work I'd done.

The motive for the decimation of our club was money, but how to discover which one of those two did not actually have any?

A sudden thought came to me. Perhaps there was a way. Not definitive, but I had to do something.

I consulted the yellow pages of the telephone book and winced when I discovered that there were some ninety-three hotels listed. I sighed, picked up the phone, and attacked the columns alphabetically, hoping fervently that Evans was not at the Zymmerman Arms.

Fortunately for my patience, I found that he was registered at the Fraidlie House. The clerk inquired whether I wanted his room rung, but I demurred. Knowing where he was was sufficient for my purposes.

I am not familiar with this city nor the status of its hotels, so I left to investigate farther.

The Fraidlie House proved to be not much more than a rat-trap in a dilapidated neighborhood. The chill of evening made it appear even worse. Why, it was hardly better than the miserable place where I was registered.

I smiled. At least that settled that. Evans was the other murderer. His story about having four hundred thousand dollars was pure fabrica-

tion. No man in his right mind, and with money, would stay in a place like that.

I was about to start my car again and return to my hotel, when I saw Evans leaving the Fraidlie House.

He carried no luggage, so he couldn't possibly be returning to Minneapolis. He had the collar of his topcoat turned up; his movements were quick, furtive. Was it possible, I wondered, that tonight he might . . . ?

He hailed a passing cab.

I started my car and followed at a discreet distance.

His taxi went down the avenue and turned onto the lake front drive. After about four miles south, the road turned slightly inland and we were in a district of fine homes—semi-estates, actually, each with four or five acres of land. This was the area in which Florian lived.

I smiled. It did look as though Evans were going to get rid of Florian tonight. I had no objections. It would save me work.

Evans' taxi stopped directly in front of Florian's home.

Really now! That wasn't particularly intelligent.

Evans was paying the driver as I passed. I drove on a bit, frowning. I remembered some of the previous accidents Evans had arranged. Good heavens, I thought, he could bungle the whole thing—and at this stage we certainly did not want a police investigation of any sort.

I made a U-turn and drove back.

I stopped a good five hundred feet beyond Florian's place and then walked back. The street was dimly lit and deserted.

I had been a guest at Florian's home some years back and I remembered his house as a two story affair, spacious, but with the quarters for the servants—a butler, a chauffeur, a cook, and a maid, married couples—over the four car garage.

It was only ten in the evening, but the living quarters over the garage were dark and the only light from the house came from Florian's study.

I glanced about, determining again that I was unobserved, and then slipped into the grounds. I made my way toward the light.

The French doors were slightly ajar and I peered inside the room.

Florian lay on the couch, his face flushed, and he was snoring loudly. A portable gas heater burned near his feet, and beside him on the floor stood an almost empty whiskey bottle and a glass.

And standing over him, clumsily gripping a fireplace poker, stood Evans. He closed his eyes, raised the poker, and gave every indication of being about to strike.

I stepped swiftly into the room. "Hold on!"

Evans stopped his swing in mid-air, opened his eyes, and blinked. "Is that you, Henry?"

"Yes, it's me," I whispered savagely. "And keep your voice down. Do you want to wake Florian?"

What in the world do you think you're doing?"

Evans lowered the poker. "I was just about to bash Florian over the head."

"Is that your idea of an accident?" I demanded sternly.

Evans shifted uncomfortably. "I thought it would look as though an intruder had murdered Florian. I was going to empty his wallet and all that sort of thing."

"Do you want the police to investigate?"

He looked at the floor. "Well, no. But I've run out of ideas."

I examined Florian and determined that he was indeed in a thorough alcoholic sleep, and not likely to be revived by anything short of an earthquake. I spoke in normal tones. "Right before you, Evans, you have the instrument for an ideal accident."

He looked about helplessly. "I don't see what you mean, Henry."

"The gas heater," I explained patiently. And far in the back of my mind, the question arose as to what a gas heater was doing in a home of this sort. "We simply extinguish the flame of the heater. In a few hours Florian should be dead. The police will assume that Florian either forgot to light the heater or that it went out by itself."

Evans looked at me with admiration. "You're really much cleverer than I am, Henry. I'm not practical at all. Are you the other murderer?"

I was aghast. "Didn't you know?"

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He shook his head. "I just tossed a coin. I've always been pretty lucky."

It was incredible! He could have ruined everything if he'd murdered me instead.

"Henry," Evans asked. "How did you know that I was the other murderer?"

"Simple. I merely ferreted out the hotel at which you were staying. The Fraidlie House is a building in a complete state of disintegration. Therefore it followed that you have no money for better accommodations. Circumstances forced you to choose that particular residence."

Evans thought about that. "But I do have money. Four hundred thousand or so."

I swallowed. "But that hotel . . .?"

"It's in the center of the art colony," Evans said. "I wanted to be near the people I love."

"But then what *is* your motive for killing?"

"Money, of course."

"But you already have four hundred thousand."

"It isn't exactly for myself. I want to erect an arts building in Minneapolis. The Evans Art Center. That would require at least a million dollars and I don't have that much."

I sighed and then looked about the room. "Wipe your fingerprints from that poker and put it back. And also remove any other prints you may have left in the room."

I watched him go about with a

handkerchief and he raised quite a bit of dust as he wiped here and there.

When he was through, I extinguished the flame of the heater. The gas began to hiss into the room. "Let's go," I said.

Evans used his handkerchief to pick up the phone.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

He seemed surprised at the tone of my voice. "I'm calling a taxi."

I closed my eyes. He was pretty pathetic. "I'll drive you," I said.

On the lake drive, with Florian's home a good two miles behind us, I felt more at ease. "How did you get Schaller to electrocute himself in his tub?"

"I visited him one night and we had a few drinks. I put something into one of his and when he passed out, I undressed him and put him in his tub. I filled it, and then dropped in the radio."

That was about the way I had figured it. "But you blundered when you shot Wentworth. If the police had discovered that he was afraid of firearms you could have ruined everything."

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "But I'm not too good at this sort of thing."

"How did you manage to drop that rivet on Naison's head? Surely you didn't climb up on the scaffolding and . . .?"

"No. I put a wallet on the sidewalk in front of the building being

erected. When Naison came along he bent down to pick it up. At that point I shot a rivet from a slingshot and hit him on the top of the head. To the police it looked as though the thing had fallen from the building."

I had to admit that was ingenious. "And I suppose you altered the steering mechanism on Terwilliger's car so that he would have his accident?"

Evans shook his head. "No. Didn't you?"

I rubbed my jaw. "That could have been an authentic accident. I suppose you struck Llewellyn over the head and then put his body on those railroad tracks?"

Evans looked at me. "No."

We were silent for a while, and then Evans said, "Of course you pushed Dodsworth off his dock?"

"No."

We drove on for half a mile.

"Dodsworth was the last to go, besides Florian, I mean," Evans said. "And so if you didn't . . . and I didn't . . .?"

I remembered the dust Evans had raised when he was wiping his fingerprints off various surfaces. I spoke more or less to myself. "One does not have a dusty house when one has four servants."

Evans nodded slowly. "If one still has four servants."

I also remembered the dark servants' quarters over the garage. And it had been only ten o'clock. And the gas heater—certainly out of

place in an extremely opulent home.

After awhile, Evans voiced our mutual discovery. "So Florian got rid of Terwilliger, Llewellyn, and Dodsworth. Evidently he needed the fund too."

And what now? I thought.

Evans was thinking of that too. "I suppose I'll have to kill you," he said. "I really regret that, Henry, but I do think that Minneapolis needs an art center."

We were in the traffic of the avenue now. Yes, I thought, I would have to kill Evans, unless. . . .

It was ridiculous . . . but still . . . considering Evans' mental equipment . . .

"Evans," I said. "I don't believe it'll be necessary for each of us to try to kill the other."

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

I nodded. "We can split the fund."

"But that's impossible. Florian said our charter terms were absolutely unbreakable."

"There is another way. I will write a suicide note and leave it, along with my coat perhaps, on a conveniently high bridge. The police will assume that I jumped off, was drowned, and that my body floated out into the lake."

Evans considered that. "And then when I inherit the fund, I split it with you?"

"Well, not exactly. You see I will have to disappear. Leave the country, as a matter of fact. It would be inconvenient and dangerous to our plan for me to reappear for my

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share. I have a much better idea."

Evans waited expectantly.

"You say that you have some four hundred thousand dollars. Why not convert that into cash, give it to me, and then I will disappear. You will inherit the entire fund."

Evans looked vaguely dubious.

"I'm perfectly willing to settle for four hundred thousand," I said. "Even though my honest share should be half a million. You may consider the extra hundred thousand my contribution to your art center."

Evans beamed. "That's awfully decent of you, Henry. I'll name one of the galleries in your honor."

"Small bills, please," I said. "But remember that this is our little se-

cret. Don't tell your lawyers why you're converting your assets to cash."

"Of course not," Evans said stiffly. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

It took Evans two months to make the conversion to cash. I accepted the money, arranged my suicide, and moved to Mexico.

Evans inherited the fund, but I'm afraid that he was in for a bit of a shock.

Really, it is criminal how little the government left poor Evans. Something in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand, I believe.

And I, of course, had four hundred thousand intact.

Dead men do not pay inheritance taxes.

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SHORT STORY CONTEST

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